COMMENTARY

That masked man

by ROBERT DE ANDREIS

Tragedy and comedy compete with the dramas of our daily lives. Every week I hear an orchestra tune up and I know it's my cue to face the music, face my daily life and crank out a column for this weekly opera whose final scene is no mystery at all.

Since the *Sentinel* claims a readership of over 100,000, my weekly readers wouldn't all fit into the Opera House, so I do a cold, imaginary reading there each week to a full house of AIDS ghosts from the City's past. I'm hidden behind that curtain, bracing for my weekly 15 minutes of fame, with about one minute to go. My regular readers don't know whether to laugh or cry. Backstage, I'm running around like a diva with my dick cut off: "The wheelchair or the walker? The deathbed or the doctor's office? An evening or a hospital gown?"

The music gets louder and light slashes across the stage as the curtain rises. I whirl around, frozen like a deer caught in the headlights. A hush falls over the house. I hear *Sentinel's* new readers swooning. "He's alive," they gasp under their powdered wigs. But what exactly am I, they wonder? I've grown from AIDS court jester to castrato, because this disease has ripped the sex addiction out of my balls, just in time for me to pursue other, more satisfying, late-life passions.

It's 7 p.m. now, the same time the curtain is rising on the Royal Ballet's *Swan Lake*, the evening I had planned to spend with my writer friend, Everett, who invited me weeks ago. But yesterday my doctor told me my white cell count was so low I'd have to wear a mask if I wanted to go. A mask?! What kind of mask, I wondered. He showed me one of those cheap Halloween Cinderella masks with the yellow molded hair. It had a coffee filter stuck in its mouth for protection. No thanks! I'd never appear in public as a blonde, especially a plastic one. The mask was off the closeout racks of Kaiser's Chemo Shop, which features its own line of "Kaiser Gabor" wigs. I can see the ad copy now: "Lose your hair? Check your plan. The better your coverage, the bigger your hair."

I told Everett about my risky health after we had arrived at the theater; he yanked me out of my seat and sent me home in a cab so fast I wondered if he was up to something. I looked back to see if he'd work this into an *All About Eve* moment. Despite his Eagle good looks and nasty boy tattoos, I prayed he wasn't going to upstage those swans with his deep-seated urge to belt out show tunes.

With an unexpected evening to myself, I felt footloose and symptom-free, all charged up by yesterday's doctor visit, when I said I would only do chemo every other week. I don't need the overkill and my body needs time to recover. Sure, I wanted to see the ballet tonight, but it would have been a reluctant look back, since I abruptly left that world years ago. Why did I abandon this love of my life? Because I realized I started too late and would never fully bloom in the field. I left and never looked back. My only injury? A cold shoulder that makes it easier for me to shrug off the thing I will never see again.

Columnist Robert De Andreis

This lone night triggered thoughts of another world I couldn't shake until recently, the sad world of sex addiction. Oddly enough, I sort of felt like going out. I opened the closet and something eerie caught my eye. My black leather jacket began to move! Its zippers purred open and the pockets clinked with the small, greasy bottles of poison for all those stale nights of hot sex. I was not tempted, but insulted. I punched out my jacket and slammed the door on it. My, those leather jackets get so pushy when they haven't been out for a while.

The phone rang. It was my elusive mistress, Elliott, sounding concerned. I assured him that I wasn't sick as my recent articles suggested — anything to lure him over. But why did he have to call right then? After the fight with the jacket, I heard some whimpering sounds in the closet, so I went to check it out. It was a trick, the old ambush trick, a classic trick from a classic jacket, and the jacket won. It was a simple case of black jacket abuse. It forced its way on me and triggered me into a mild sex trance. I got dressed to walk my dog in the same park where I met Elliott a few years ago. "Robert," Elliott said, "I never tell you what to do because it never works, but if your doctor advised you to skip the ballet, are you going to wear a mask out cruising tonight, with the mouth cut out, no doubt?" He had a point. I shrugged, drew a tub and sunk into it.

Besides forcing myself to buy flowers these days, by thinking of it as a necessary part of my treatment plan; I've also been taking healing baths to help unwind my dying body. Every night, I fill the tub with rich gels, salts and oils. I imagine stepping into this steamy primordial spa, this bubbling ooze, where life was formed eons ago. I soak my dying body and fall into a deep sleep, where I dream I'm a dying swan, peacefully drifting away in a painting of Monet's water lily ponds.

Quick! Hand me a bath towel! Forgive me as I step right out of the frame, dripping wet, but this week I also stepped out of another beautiful painting. Recently, photorealist painter Jim Left did a portrait of me so alive no disease could ever frame it. It gives me the chills every time I see it. I feel so honored. But after I'm dead, don't hang it in the library or you'll see my cut-out eyes darting back and forth keeping an eternal watch on you. This painting will be on display with Jim Left's new show at the Lone Star Saloon (1354 Harrison St.) from July 14-31.

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